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Excavations from Cloghcor Townland, Co. Antrim, 2017

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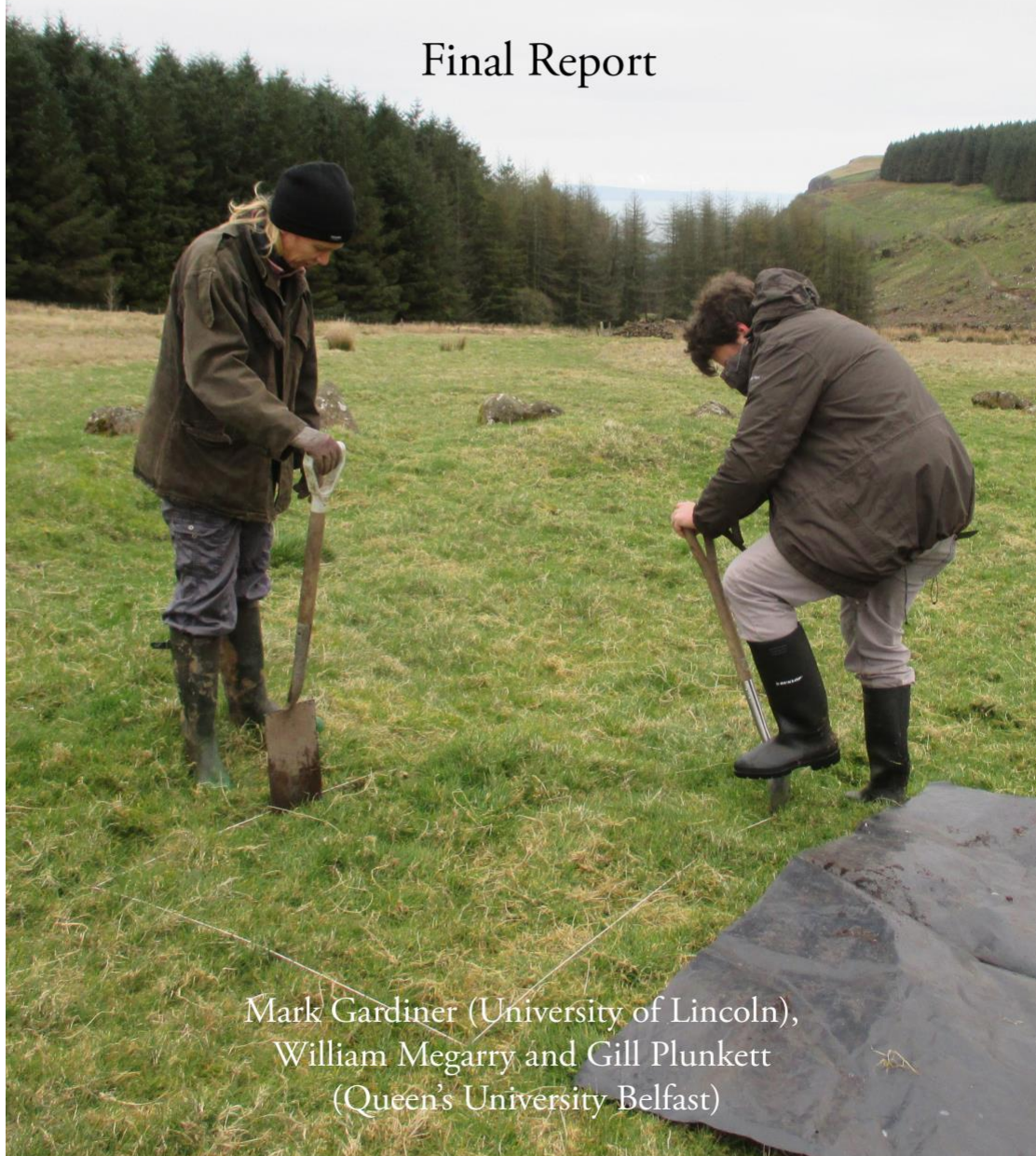
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Excavations at Cloghcor Townland, Co. Antrim, 2017

Final Report



Mark Gardiner (University of Lincoln),
William Megarry and Gill Plunkett
(Queen's University Belfast)

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Summary

A trench was cut across a hut circle in Cloghcor Townland to locate and sample the buried soil. It identified a deposit below the hut wall which contained numerous fragments of charcoal and burnt clay. Samples were submitted for radiocarbon dating and indicated that the building was dated to or was later than the Late Bronze Age.

This report provides a record of a small excavation in Cloghcor townland, Ardclinis parish, Co. Antrim (IGR 320834/418809) and has been written on the completion of the analysis of that site. The excavation was undertaken on 7 April 2017 by Mark Gardiner (licence holder), William Megarry and Gillian Plunkett, under licence no. AE/17/43, and the work was carried out with permission of James and Anne McHenry of Diskert Farm.

1. Background

Between August 2010 and 2017 a large-scale survey was undertaken of the Antrim Plateau between Glenariff and Glencloy, identifying more than three hundred sites. Some of the results of this have been published and further work is planned (Gardiner 2010, 2012, 2015, 2018, forthcoming; Gardiner and McDermott 2017). That work built upon earlier, unpublished surveys by Peter Woodman (see Woodman 1983) and Barrie Hartwell, as well as a doctoral thesis by Elizabeth Francis (1987). The survey work from 2010 onwards led to a wider, though more superficial survey of the uplands of north of Ireland and a recognition that there were extensive remains from many periods in such areas (e.g. Gardiner 2014).

The areas examined in the survey from 2010 onwards included the head of Glenariff to the east of the Dungonnell Reservoir, where a number of buildings and boundary banks were recognized (Fig. 1). Around the same time an analysis of a pollen core from Slieveanorra Bog, near the head of Glendun, indicated that cereal pollen was present in the late Middle Ages (Plunkett and Swindles submitted). That result accords with evidence of small-scale farming found in the Antrim uplands survey and attributed to the late Middle Ages (Gardiner forthcoming). These discoveries suggested that it was time to reappraise the use of the uplands to understand how and why these areas had been used over a period of millennia.

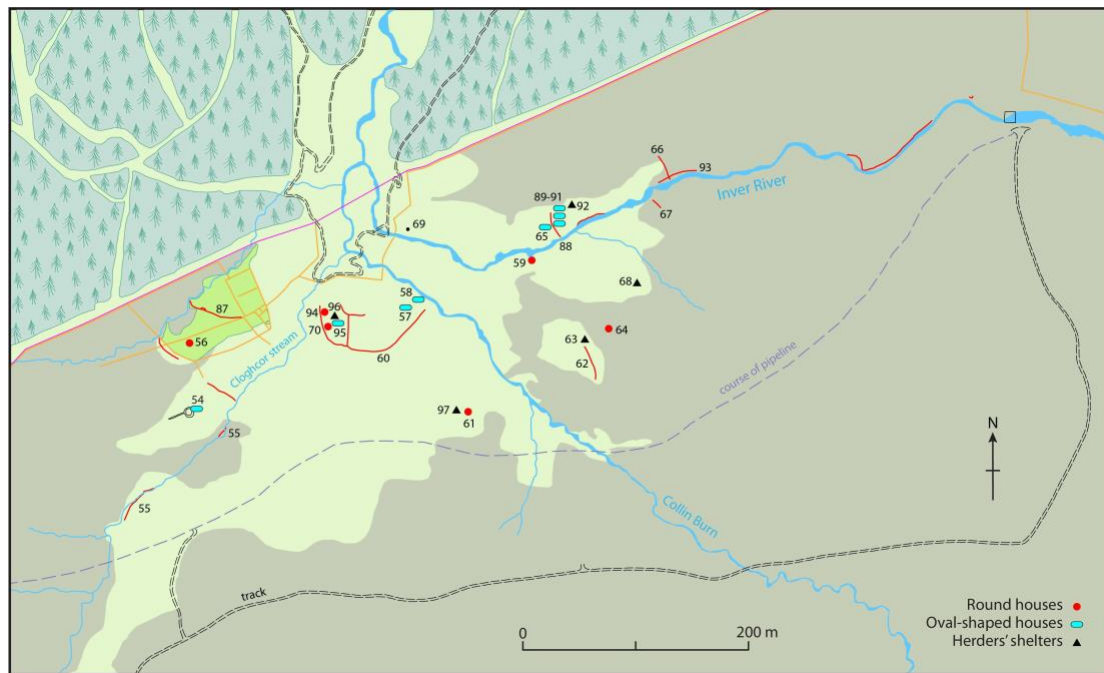


Fig. 1 Plan of archaeological features at the head of Glenariff

One of the fundamental problems of working on the archaeology of uplands is that of dating the remains. While environmental samples taken from peat may yield radiocarbon dates, archaeological sites in the uplands often have no associated artefacts for dating purposes. However, in 2011 soil samples were taken from the top of a buried soil horizon associated with the construction of a buildings on a Norwegian site at Avaldsnes on the island of Karmøy (Gardiner and Mehler in prep.). Since no other means of dating was possible, these were submitted for radiocarbon determination. The samples taken from opposite sides of the building produced statistically identical dates and ones which closely matched those of the historical records. This suggested that in certain circumstances it might be viable to use buried soils as material for radiocarbon dating.

In order to investigate the issue of dating further, a trial excavation on site with a possible buried soil was undertaken to obtain samples. The site chosen was a round house identified in the Antrim Plateau survey at the head of Glenariff. The site was chosen chiefly because of its relative accessibility to the road. The presence of a site was indicated by a raised bank which established the location of the wall of the building. The bank appeared to have been constructed over a buried soil.

2. Context

The glacial valley of Glenariff narrows towards its head to the west-southwest and splits into two followed by the Glenariff and Inver Rivers respectively. The latter rises on the Antrim plateau where it is also fed by Cloghcor Stream and Collin Burn. On the slopes around these streams are areas of better pasture which contrast with the blanket bog which covers the higher land beyond. The building (Fig. 1, no. 56; Fig. 2) investigated lies in better pasture near to a fold on the slope above Cloghcor Stream at an altitude of about 255m. It is one of a series of structures in this area, which includes a large stone-edged enclosure on the east side of Cloghcor Stream (Fig. 1, no. 60).



Fig. 2 The hut circle before excavation lying on the right (south) of a later field wall

3. The site investigated

The site is not recorded on the Sites and Monuments Record, but was surveyed by Mark Gardiner in 2014 using a total station theodolite as part of a study of the area to the west of Cloghcor Stream (Fig. 3). The site was identified from a circular bank with an internal diameter of between 6.4m and 7.3m. It was situated in a pasture field on the hillslope which falls to the east. The bank cannot be identified on the eastern side where the entrance is presumed to have been located. The bank was reinforced with stones, many of which protruded through the sod. There is no evidence that the land has been ploughed, although an area of lazy beds can be identified within an enclosure to the north-east.

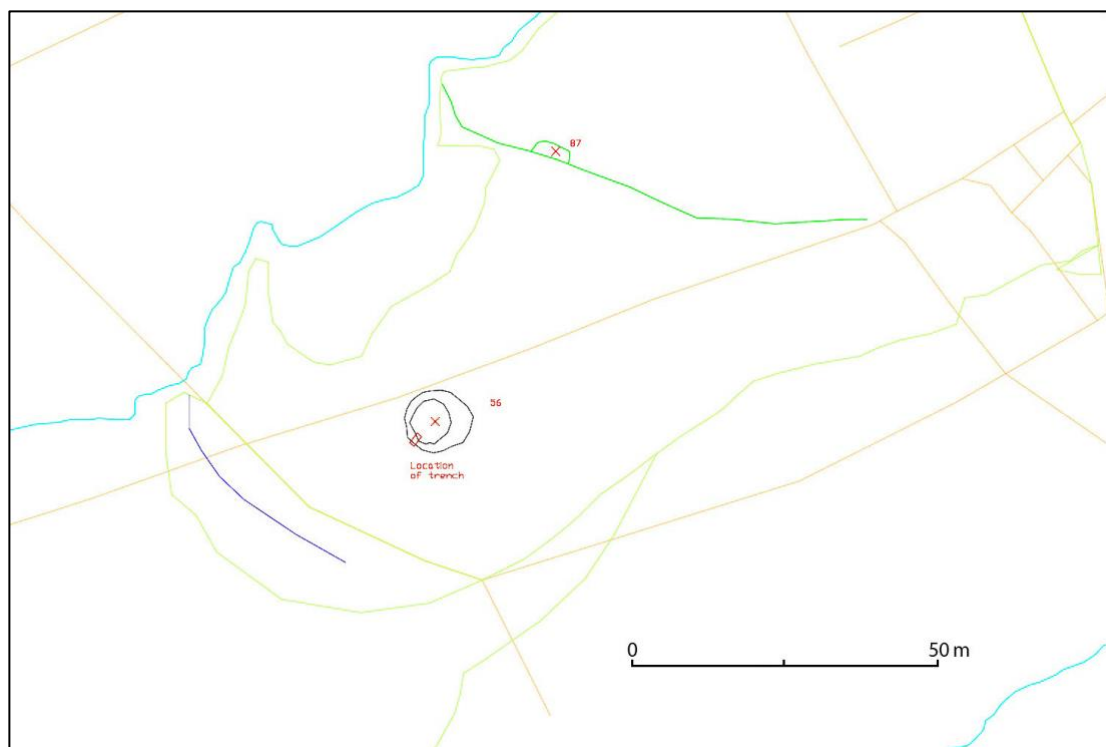


Fig. 3 Detail survey plan of the earthwork (cf. Fig. 1), showing the location of the excavation trench

The site is typical of a round house, a type of monument dating predominantly to the Bronze Age or early Middle Ages. There are no other associated features, although a bank and enclosure lie a short distance downhill to the northeast (no. 87). Other round houses have been recorded in the surrounding area (nos 59, 61, 64, 70 and 94), and indeed have been found in many other places in the survey area between Glenariff and Glencloy.

4. Method

A trench measuring 2m by 1m was laid out and the sod was removed by spade. The base of the topsoil was removed by mattock and shovel, and the deposits below were then excavated by trowel. An extension to the trench measuring 600m and 1m long was cut at the north-east end to clarify the stratigraphy.

On completion of work, the section was drawn and the site backfilled and re-turfed.

5. Archaeological contexts

The topsoil (1) was about 150mm deep and merged into a similar deposit containing a greater density of large stones (2) which formed part of the wall of the round house (Fig. 4). Some of these stones had tumbled downhill into the interior of the building, and it was clear that only the general lie of the wall could be identified, but not its precise edges. Its exact dimensions could not be determined, nor was there any other structural evidence indicating the wall.

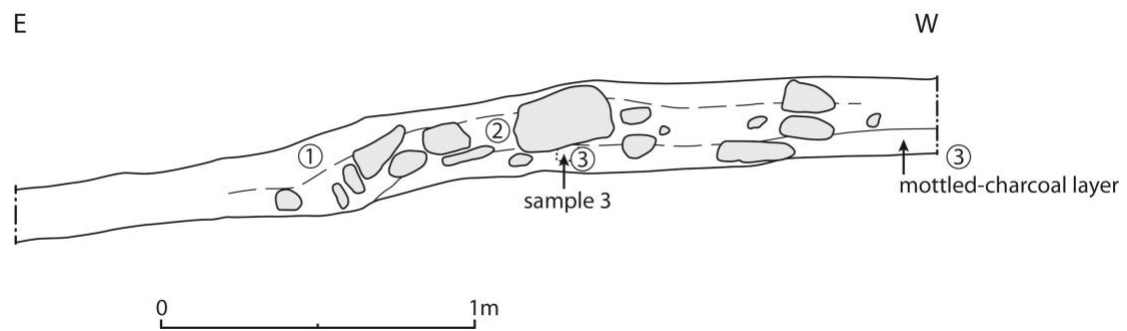


Fig. 4 North-west facing section of the excavated trench

The stones of the wall were removed and this revealed a mottled deposit of lighter coloured, orange-brown soil (3) containing numerous fragments of charcoal and rare fragments of burnt clay. This overlay natural deposits.



Fig. 5 Excavated trench showing the wider context of the site looking north-east



Fig. 6 North-west facing section of the excavated trench (cf. Fig. 4). Scale length 0.5m.

6. Preliminary conclusions

Two factors made this investigation problematic. The first was the presence of extensive activity on the site marked by substantial amounts of charcoal in the soil which predated the construction of the roundhouse. The second was the lack of sharply defined horizons which might mark the junction between the construction phase and that of the buried soil. All the boundaries between contexts were merging, so that the top of the context beneath the round house wall could not be clearly seen. This is almost certainly due to worm action. Numerous worms were noted during excavation. Bioturbation has the effect of mixing the boundaries between deposits.

7. Radiocarbon determination

Three samples were taken and the charcoal from these extracted. Short-lived single-entity samples were preferred and the one fragment of ashwood and two pieces of hazelnut shell were submitted for radiocarbon determination in the CHRONO laboratory at Queen's University Belfast. Two of the samples (UBA-39209, 39210), both from Sample 3 are effectively identical and, when calibrated, date to the Late Bronze Age. The third is considerably earlier, dating to the Mesolithic.

Table
Results of Radiocarbon Determination

UBA No	Sample ID	Material Type	14C Age	±	Calibrated date at two sigma (95.4%)
UBA-39209	Cloghcor S3-1	Charred ashwood	2894	28	1195-995 BC
UBA-39210	Cloghcor S3-2	hazelnut shell fragment	2884	32	1193-943 BC
UBA-39211	Cloghcor S2	hazelnut shell fragment	6248	32	5310-5077 BC

8. Discussion

The two LBA dates come from the same sample (Sample 3) taken from beneath a large stone which formed part of the hut structure (Fig. 4). The third date was a sample (Sample 2) taken from the spread of charcoal revealed in the trench and the hazel nut shell must be treated as residual in this context.

Sample 3 (UBA- 39209, 39210) does not date the hut circle, but provides a *terminus post quem* for its construction. However, the absence of any deposit between the stone structure and the charcoal might suggest that the latter may have immediately preceded the former. This is not a certain conclusion since the episode of burning indicated by Context 3 could have taken place any time before the construction of the house, and the land subsequently stripped to form a surface for building.

This small piece of work, when considered with the results of Elizabeth Francis' study, provides growing evidence for extensive Late Bronze Age activity on the Antrim Uplands.

9. Acknowledgements

We are grateful to James and Anne McHenry of Diskert Farm for permission to excavate, and to Prof. Paula Reimer and the CHRONO lab for providing the dates.

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